

The Abbasid Dynasty: The Golden Age of Islamic Civilization

The Abbasid Caliphate, which ruled the Islamic world, oversaw the golden age of Islamic culture. The dynasty ruled the Islamic Caliphate from 750 to 1258 AD, making it one of the longest and most influential Islamic dynasties. For most of its early history, it was the largest empire in the world, and this meant that it had contact with distant neighbors such as the Chinese and Indians in the East, and the Byzantines in the West, allowing it to adopt and synthesize ideas from these cultures.

The Abbasid Revolution

The Abbasid Dynasty overthrew the preceding Umayyad Dynasty, which was based in Damascus, Syria. The Umayyads had become increasingly unpopular, especially in the eastern territories of the caliphate. The Umayyads favored Syrian Arabs over other Muslims and treated *mawali*, newly converted Muslims, as second-class citizens. The most numerous group of *mawali* were the Persians, who lived side-by-side with Arabs in the east who were angry at the favor shown to Syrian Arabs. Together, they were ripe for rebellion. Other Muslims were angry with the Umayyads for turning the caliphate into a hereditary dynasty. Some believed that a single family should not hold power, while Shiites believed that true authority belonged to the family of the Prophet Muhammad through his son-in-law Ali, and the Umayyads were not part of Muhammad's family.

All these various groups who were angry with the Umayyads united under the Abbasids, who began a rebellion against the Umayyads in Persia. The Abbasids built a coalition of Persian *mawali*, Eastern Arabs, and Shiites. The Abbasids were able to gain Shiite support because they claimed descent from Muhammad through Muhammad's uncle Abbas. Their descent from Muhammad was not through Ali, as Shiites would have preferred, but Shiites still considered the Abbasids better than the Umayyads.

A Persian general, Abu Muslim, who supported Abbasid claims to power, led the Abbasid armies. His victories allowed the Abbasid leader Abul 'Abbas al-Saffah to enter the Shiite-dominated city of Kufa in 748 and declare himself caliph. In 750, the army of Abu Muslim and al-Saffah faced the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II at the Battle of the Zab near the Tigris River. Marwan II was defeated, fled, and was killed. As-Saffah captured Damascus and slaughtered the remaining members of the Umayyad family (except for one, Abd al-Rahman, who escaped to Spain and continued the Umayyad Dynasty there). The Abbasids were the new rulers of the caliphate.

The Early Abbasids

The Abbasids had led a revolution against the unpopular policies of the Umayyads, but those who expected major change were disappointed. Under the second Abbasid Caliph, al-Mansur (r. 754–775), it became clear that much of the Umayyad past would be continued. The Abbasids maintained the hereditary control of the caliphate, forming a new dynasty. The alliance with the Shiites was short lived, and

the Abbasids became champions of Sunni orthodoxy, upholding the authority of their family over that of Ali, and continuing the subjugation of the Shiites. Even Abu Muslim, the brilliant Persian general who engineered the rise of the Abbasids, was deemed a threat and executed. However, the Abbasids did prove loyal to their Persian mawali allies. In fact, Abbasid culture would come to be dominated by the legacy of Persian civilization. The Abbasid court was heavily influenced by Persian customs, and members of the powerful Persian Barmakid family acted as the advisers of the caliphs and rivaled them in wealth and power.

One of the earliest, and most important, changes the Abbasids made was to move the capital of the Islamic empire from the old Umayyad power base of Damascus to a new city—Baghdad. Baghdad was founded in 762 by al-Mansur on the banks of the Tigris River. The city was round in shape, and designed from the beginning to be a great capital and the center of the Islamic world. It was built not far from the old Persian capital of Ctesiphon, and its location reveals the desire of the dynasty to connect itself to Persian culture.

Baghdad grew quickly with encouragement from the Abbasid state, and it was soon the largest city in the world. At Baghdad, the Persian culture that the Umayyads had attempted to suppress was now allowed to thrive. Art, poetry, and science flourished. The Abbasids learned from the Chinese (allegedly from Chinese soldiers captured in battle) the art of making paper. Cheap and durable, paper became an important material for spreading literature and knowledge.

Islamic Golden Age

The fifth caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809), is remembered as one of history's greatest patrons of the arts and sciences. Under his rule, Baghdad became the world's most important center for science, philosophy, medicine, and education. The massive size of the caliphate meant that it had contact and shared borders with many distant empires, so scholars at Baghdad could collect, translate, and expand upon the knowledge of other civilizations, such as the Egyptians, Persians, Indians, Chinese, Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines. The successors of Harun al-Rashid, especially his son al-Ma'mun (r. 813–833), continued his policies of supporting artists, scientists, and scholars. Al-Ma'mun founded the *Bayt al-Hikma*, the House of Wisdom, in Baghdad. A library, an institute for translators, and in many ways an early form of university, the House of Wisdom hosted Muslim and non-Muslim scholars who sought to translate and gather the cumulative knowledge of human history in one place, and in one language—Arabic.

At the House of Wisdom, important ideas from around the world came together. The introduction of Indian numerals, which have become standard in the Islamic and Western worlds, greatly aided in mathematic and scientific discovery. Scholars such as Al-Kindi revolutionized mathematics and synthesized Greek philosophy with Islamic thought. Al-Biruni and Abu Nasr Mansur—among many other scholars—made important contributions to geometry and astronomy. Al-Khwarizmi, expanding upon Greek mathematical concepts, developed Algebra (the word “algorithm” is a corruption

of his name). Ibn al-Haytham made important contributions to the field of optics, and is generally held to have developed the concept of the scientific method.

A number of very practical innovations took place, especially in the field of agriculture. Improved methods of irrigation allowed more land to be cultivated, and new types of mills and turbines were used to reduce the need for labor (though slavery was still very common in both the countryside and cities). Crops and farming techniques were adopted from far-flung neighboring cultures. Rice, cotton, and sugar were taken from India, citrus fruits from China, and sorghum from Africa. Thanks to Islamic farmers, these crops eventually made their way to the West. Such Islamic innovation would continue, even as the Abbasid government fell into chaos.

A Long and Slow Decline

Due to several very capable caliphs and their advisers, the Abbasid Caliphate thrived through the early ninth century, despite the major challenges of ruling a massive and multiethnic empire. Besides being a great patron of the arts and sciences, Harun al-Rashid also brought the Abbasid Caliphate to its high point. Still, he had to deal with revolts in Persia and North Africa, and he removed from power the Persian Barmakid family, the source of many great advisers (supposedly after the adviser Ja'far impregnated the caliph's sister, though probably because al-Rashid feared their power would eclipse his own). Al-Rashid's son, Caliph al-Ma'mun not only continued his father's patronage by establishing the House of Wisdom, but he made a number of important independent innovations.

Al-Ma'mun adopted the radical Mu'tazili theology, which was influenced by Greek philosophy and held that God could be understood through rational inquiry, and that belief and practice should be subject to reason. He established the *mihna*, an inquisition in which the adherence of scholars and officials to Mu'tazili theology was tested, and they could be imprisoned or even killed if they did not follow the theology. As a result, al-Ma'mun's reign saw a growing division between the Islamic sovereign and the Islamic people. This division was exacerbated by his creation of an army of Central Asian soldiers loyal only to him. During al-Ma'mun's reign, the provincial governors, called emirs, became increasingly independent. The governor of Persia set up his own dynasty and ruled as a king, though he continued to recognize the Abbasid caliph. This trend of independent governors would continue, causing major problems for the caliphate.

After the caliphate of al-Ma'mun, Abbasid power began to noticeably decline. The cost of running a massive empire and maintaining a large bureaucracy required steady revenues, and as the authority of the caliphate diminished it was able to collect fewer taxes. In order to stabilize the state finances, the caliphs granted tax-farms to governors and military commanders. These governors, with their own troops and revenue bases, soon proved independent-minded and disloyal.

The caliph al-Mu'tasim (r. 833–842) furthered the gap between the caliph and his people. Expanding on al-Ma'mun's new army, he created his own military force of slave soldiers called *ghilman* (later known as "Mamluks"). As the elite guard of the caliph, these slaves began acting superior to the people of Baghdad, which inspired anger and

led to riots. Instead of trying to diffuse the situation, al-Mu'tasim simply moved the capital away from Baghdad and settled in Samarra, 60 miles to the north. Away from the bulk of their subjects who lived in Baghdad, the caliphs became insulated from the problems of their empire.

Increasingly, the caliph's soldiers controlled Samaria, turning the caliph into little more than a puppet. When a caliph was not pliant, they simply killed him. Al-Muwaffaq, the brother of caliph al-Mu'tamid (r. 870–892), tried to change this. Acting as his brother's regent, he had the caliph move the capital back to Baghdad, and from there al-Muwaffaq guided the caliphate to new prosperity and defeated the Zanj Rebellion, an uprising of African slaves that posed a major threat to the caliphate. Thanks to al-Muwaffaq, Abbasid power gained a new lease on life.

However, decline began anew under the reign of al-Muqtadir (r. 908–932), who was raised to the throne at the age of thirteen by members of the court who knew they could control him. For al-Muqtadir's long, twenty-five-year reign, he was too weak to do anything but act as a tool of various court factions. Under his caliphate, territory after territory broke free of Abbasid rule. By the end, Abbasid authority extended hardly beyond Baghdad. Al-Muqtadir was eventually killed by city guards after he bankrupted the state to the point where he could not even pay their salaries.

Al-Muqtadir's son, al-Radi (r. 934–940) is often considered the last caliph to exercise any real authority. He tried to raise a powerful governor of Iraq who would hold power over all the other independent emirs. Thus, al-Radi created the title *amir al-umara*, “emir of emirs,” for the governor of Iraq. This plan backfired, however, because the title effectively invested supreme authority in its holder, leaving the caliph simply as a figurehead. The Shiite Buyids soon took the title and held it as a hereditary position, becoming the de facto rulers of Iraq.

From this point on, the Abbasid caliphs became little more than religious figureheads. In the mid-11th century, the Buyids were ousted by the Sunni Seljuq Turks, who conquered Iran, Iraq, Syria, and most of Asia Minor, forming a new and vibrant Islamic Empire. The Seljuqs continued to keep the Abbasid caliph as the titular ruler while exercising true authority over the empire as sultans.

The End of the Abbasids

When the Seljuq sultanate collapsed in the twelfth century, an opportunity presented itself for Caliph al-Nasir (r. 1180–1225) to attempt to restore Abbasid power in Iraq. His long reign of forty-seven years allowed him ample time to reconquer Mesopotamia and further develop Baghdad as a center of learning. His chief rival was the Sultanate of Khwarezm, which ruled Persia. Supposedly, al-Nasir appealed to the Mongols, an expanding central-Asian nomad empire, for help against Khwarezm. Under al-Nasir's less competent successors, this backfired disastrously. The Mongols completely overran Khwarezm and then turned their attention to Baghdad.

The Mongols seem to have wanted to rule, as the Buyids and Seljuqs before them, by holding real military power but allowing the Abbasid caliph symbolic authority. Caliph al-Mu'tasim (r. 1242–1258), however, refused to acknowledge their authority and offered these non-Muslims only insults and threats. Faced with Mongol invasion, he did

little to prepare, and the Mongol hordes soon surrounded Baghdad. They captured the city in 1258 and sacked it. They trampled the caliph to death, and completely destroyed the city. They killed somewhere between 100,000 and a million people, destroyed all the books of the House of Wisdom and other libraries, burned down all the great monuments of the city, and left Baghdad a smoldering ruin. This marks the end of the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad, and the abrupt end of the Islamic golden age.

The Abbasid line was reestablished in 1261, in Egypt. The sultans of Egypt appointed an Abbasid caliph in Cairo, but these Egyptian caliphs were even more symbolic than the late caliphs had been in Baghdad, and were simply used to legitimize the power of the sultans. The authority of these caliphs extended strictly to religious matters. Still, the Egypt-based period of the Abbasid dynasty lasted over 250 years.

In 1517, the Ottoman Empire conquered Egypt. The last Abbasid caliph, al-Mutawakkil III, was forced to surrender all his authority to the Ottoman Sultan Selim I. This was the end of seven-and-a-half centuries of Abbasid history. However, under the Ottoman rulers the caliphate was once again wedded to a powerful Islamic Empire, which exercised true authority in the Muslim world.

Summary:

- The Abbasids came to power in a rebellion against the Umayyads. Though they built a coalition of various forces unhappy with the Umayyads, once the Abbasids were in power they continued many Umayyad policies.
- One thing that distinguished the Abbasids from the Umayyads was their embrace of Persian culture. They moved the capital to a new city, Baghdad, close to the old Persian capital.
- Under the Abbasids, Baghdad became the largest and most cultured city in the world. Caliph Harun al-Rashid sponsored art, literature, and science there, and his son al-Ma'mun created the House of Wisdom, where knowledge from around the world was translated into Arabic.
- Thanks to these policies, the Abbasids oversaw an Islamic golden age in which the learning of many civilizations was preserved and expanded upon.
- Slowly, Abbasid power weakened in the face of independent governors, called *emirs*, and a military that controlled the caliphs.
- By the time of Caliph al-Radi (r. 934–940), Abbasid power was mostly limited to Baghdad. Al-Radi created the title of Emir of Emirs to check the power of the various independent emirs, but this only diminished the authority of the caliph and allowed the Emir of Emirs to become the true ruler of the caliphate.
- The Abbasids became little more than figureheads, until the reign of caliph al-Nasir (r. 1180–1225), who reasserted power. But alas, his successors were not as successful, and the Abbasid Empire was wiped out by the Mongols, who sacked Baghdad.

- After this, the Abbasid caliphs continued to rule from Cairo as religious figureheads. The Abbasid line of caliphs ended when Egypt was conquered by the Ottomans, and the caliphate was claimed by the Ottoman sultan.